Workers on the lowest ground

The challenges for both the Egyptian migrants in the Jordan Valley and for the Jordanian civic space

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Large farms are situated between 50 and 133 kilometers from the Jordanian capital,

Amman, in the Jordan Valley, which extends from the Sea of Galilee in the north to the point where the Jordan River empties into the Dead Sea in the south. These fertile lands are the backbone of Jordan's agricultural sector and one of the most hazardous occupations, with the majority of laborers being Egyptian immigrants.

I first met Tawfiq, and his fellow Egyptian workers, at the lowest point on the surface of the earth. The majority of them originated from agricultural regions in Egypt, and have since joined plantation farms.

The work of Tawfiq and his companions begins before sunrise, around 5:30 a.m., and continues until 3 p.m., or it may extend depending on the agricultural season and the height of the workday. When we arrived around 10 a.m., they were eating breakfast on the side of the road; the meal was prepared by one of the Pakistani families living on the farm who had immigrated to Jordan in the 1970s.

It was the season for fruit harvesting, where they begin with the first produce, then the second, etc., and most workers receive a short break approximately every two hours. Employers favor hiring Egyptian workers and compensate them at a higher rate than other workers. This is due to a number of factors, including their constant proximity to farms as a result of their residences, as well as their superior physical strength and endurance compared to other employees.

However, despite their efforts, agricultural migrant laborers encounter numerous obstacles that limit their access to certain basic rights. One of the greatest obstacles is the Sponsorship System (*Kafala*):

Tawfiq, along with the majority of Egyptian workers, is linked to his sponsor via the kafala system, despite not working for him. This system provides employers with extensive control over the legal status of their employees, making them susceptible to exploitation and abuse.

Tawfiq informs us that he is unable to visit his family in Egypt due to his employer's refusal to provide the necessary permission and that he is requesting additional funds without legal justification. Additionally, Tawfiq's employer is withholding his passport and work permit, a common practice in Jordan that limits his mobility.

Summer temperatures in the Jordan Valley can reach 50 degrees Celsius, putting laborers like Tawfiq at risk of sunstrokes or snakebites. According to one of the workers who hosted us, the Ministry of Agriculture does not provide any protection materials, including serpent protection, and while the employer can provide them, he does so infrequently because, in his opinion, the land is extensive and difficult to manage.

I did not locate an emergency health clinic or a first aid kit within the farmland. When I asked Tawfiq and a worker from Pakistan who was standing next to us about this, they informed me that workers here cure themselves with natural mixtures or by opening antibiotic capsules and applying the powder to the wound or inflammation.











Informal networks of solidarity

Non-Jordanians are prohibited by Jordanian law from forming associations or labor unions. The Egyptian embassy does not provide adequate support or information to its workers. These problems were exacerbated by the fact that many laborers were oblivious of their legal rights or lacked access to legal assistance. Some employees were even subjected to exploitative practices, such as employers seizing their passports or forcing them to work without pay. Consequently, through their social networks, informal networks of solidarity have emerged among Egyptian migrants. Tawfiq explained that they frequently consult with tribal leader “Sheikh Al Ashera", other workers resort to an Egyptian leader known as the "Al Umda" to mediate disputes. Due to the lack of medical insurance for all agricultural laborers, including Egyptians, Al Umda also assists those in need of financial assistance or medical care.

"If the employer fails to pay my wages. In this region, it is feasible to inform 'Shaikh Al

Ashera' of the situation. The 'Sheikh Al Ashera' requests the name of the employer and calls him to inquire why he did not grant the Egyptians their wages. After a week, The Shaikh provides the money, apologizes to us, and informs us that this is our right; if he does not give us the money, I cannot do anything else. I keep assuring myself that there is no problem, “I'm not here to cause trouble."

As we walked through the neighborhood, it became evident that the vast majority of Egyptian workers reside in communal housing without even the most fundamental amenities. Tawfiq led us through the labyrinth of businesses that lined the streets, pointing out the entrances that resembled tunnels. The majority of residents choose to domicile there because there are no other affordable alternatives. Where the monthly rent for each room is 50 JD (70 USD), which they are able to secure by sharing it. However, there were no private bathrooms, and each of the three apartments shared a single restroom.

Tawfiq walks us between the residences and says in jest that all human rights organizations should come to document these residences. He then says in a triumphant tone that he escaped from these residences recently and was able to move to a room on the upper floor that overlooks the street.

It appears that workers are acclimated to this way of life; however, they have consistently demonstrated the ability to endure these conditions in order to make a living. When they delve deeper into the dialogue, however, the majority affirm that what they are experiencing is contrary to their expectations in Egypt. One migrant worker concluded his remarks by stating, "You've seen how the residences are. Is it possible for anyone to live in these dwellings comfortably?!"





Agriculture workers in Jordan have been excluded from the Labor law for many years, leaving them without wage protection, social security coverage, and adequate occupational safety and health measures. In an effort to alleviate the severe working conditions, the Council of Ministers issued Regulation No. 19/2021 for Agricultural Workers.

The Regulation does not address the protection requirements of agricultural workers and does not reflect the recruitment of these workers. The regulation presupposes that agriculture workers have a defined employer, whereas in reality, these workers labor daily on various farms through intermediaries known as "Shawish."

This will have consequences for the enjoyment of employees' rights, such as paid leave, adequate accommodation, and medical care in the event of a workplace injury. Additionally, it has numerous flaws; it primarily restates the Labor Law's provisions and adds no substantial protections based on the nature of this type of labor. In addition, an employer is exempt from fundamental worker's rights if he or she employs fewer than three employees.

These rights include limits on working hours per day and per week, break times, the right to 150% of his normal wage for working during his weekly rest days, official holidays or religious holidays, annual and sick leaves, maternity leave, and the exclusion of agricultural workers from the provisions of the Social Security Law, leaving them without social protection.

Few Non-governmental local organizations in Jordan are advocating for the amendment of this Regulation so that agriculture employees can enjoy their full rights, receive social protection, and be penalized if their employers violate their rights. These organizations include Tamkeen for Legal Aid, Justice Center for Legal Aid and Information and Research Center – King Hussein Foundation. In addition, these efforts utilize international human rights mechanisms accessible in Jordan, such as the Universal Periodic Review.

It is important to acknowledge that the civic space in Jordan is diminishing and the influence and impact of unions are declining, which naturally has implications for Egyptian migrants in the country as well.

Due to the vulnerability of these migrant workers, it is crucial to increase the number of non-governmental organizations in Jordan that provide legal services to migrant workers. Additionally, NGOs in Egypt can play a crucial role in raising awareness in Egyptian villages from which workers migrate about work permits, working conditions in Jordan, and how to

overcome potential obstacles in Jordan. Unfortunately, non-governmental organizations in Egypt and Jordan have not collaborated to enhance advocacy efforts and services.